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SUBJECT: NICARAGUA: ON THE EVE OF RAAN ELECTIONS

REF: 2008 MANAGUA 1517

Classified By: Amb. Robert J. Callahan for reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

1. (C) SUMMARY: On the eve of the North Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAN) January 18 municipal elections, contacts described conditions as tense. The Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) party ran an aggressive, well-funded campaign, while other parties, such as the Liberal Constitutional Party (PLC), and the Miskito Indian Yatama party (Yatama), lack similar resources. Opposition unity movements were underway in Waspam but had faltered in Puerto Cabezas. Liberals alleged election law violations by the Supreme Electoral Council (CSE) and election observers from the Bilwi Ecumenical Pastors' Council lacked the resources and training to be successful. Finally, there were reports that FSLN sympathizers had sent a truck full of pre-marked ballots to the region and that shock groups would be ready to "defend the vote" on election night. In short, the FSLN has covered its bases to assure election results that will most benefit the party. END SUMMARY

COWS, PIGS, CHICKENS, PINATAS, AND STOVES FOR VOTES

2. (C) On January 8 and 9, EmbOff traveled to the RAAN to assess conditions ahead of the January 18 municipal elections. As previously reported (reftel), FSLN party leaders were aggressively using government programs and small loans to attract cross-over voters and keep existing party members faithful. RAAN contacts told us that Citizen Power Council (CPCs) and FSLN party leaders specifically directed the government's "zero hunger" program in the RAAN, distributing free cows, pigs, and food stuffs to targeted audiences instead of the neediest people. During the week of Christmas the FSLN candidates in Puerto Cabezas gave out free chickens, cooking stoves and gas tanks as well as Christmas pinatas and toys, all paid for with government funds, to potential voters.

3. (C) Other candidates from the PLC or the regional Pamyuk party barely had enough funds to pay for the gas in order to visit outlying communities. Instead, Liberal candidates relied on grass-roots canvassing and public rallies to solicit votes. Puerto Cabezas PLC mayor candidate Orson "Blas" Coleman used his daily Miskito-language radio program to advance his campaign and recruited surrogates to visit outlying communities. Since the Waspam PLC mayor candidate did not have access to radio (reftel) he personally traveled to communities along the Rio Coco River and further inland to campaign. Liberal candidates in Rosita filed complaints with the municipal election council (CEM) that cedula from the CES had only been delivered to FSLN supporters, and that government buildings and vehicles were illegally used by the FSLN candidates during the campaign. Similar complaints were filed in other municipalities during the November 2008 municipal elections held in the rest of Nicaragua. (NOTE: Cedula are the Nicaraguan national ID registration cards that a voter must present in order to vote during an election. END NOTE)

ROADBLOCKS GONE, VIOLENCE LATER?

4. (C) Beginning in late December, national media reported roadblocks outside the two major towns of Waspam and Bilwi and at strategic crossroads

5. (C) Despite the disappearance of the roadblocks, our contacts told us that the mood was tense in the region. Catholic Church leader in Bilwi, Father Rodolfo French, expressed his grave concern that there would be violence after the election is over. He believes that if the FSLN lose in Puerto Cabezas, there would be more violence than if the PLC and Yatama lose. Liberal contacts told us that they were willing to organize protests and shock groups if the vote was "stolen" from them.

UNITY MOVEMENT ENDS IN PUERTO CABEZAS

6. (C) In the final week of the campaign, local political leaders and candidates called for the opposition to unite in support of PLC mayor candidate Blas. As previously reported (reftel) the Resistance Party of Nicaragua (PRN) candidate Alvaro Ramirez announced his support to Blas without formally withdrawing from the race. Ramirez told EmbOff that after his announcement, national PRN officials denounced his action and forced the regional election council to replace his name on the ballot with another PRN candidate. On January 6, the vice mayor candidate from the Nicaraguan Liberal Alliance (ALN) party, Baptist minister Leonard Coulson, announced his support for Blas. It was widely believed that the ALN mayor candidate and former Contra fighter, Victor Alvarado, would follow suit. However, Alvarado explained to EmbOff that he would not withdraw because he believed that it was "God's will that he win" and that "Blas is as bad as other corrupt Yatama leaders - Brooklyn Rivera, Steadman Fagoth." Reportedly, during the 2006 presidential election, Blas convinced Alvarado to contribute \$4,000 to the ALN Eduardo Montealegre campaign and was subsequently punished by the

FSLN-controlled regional government by withholding his fishing license for two years. Alvarado's personal vendetta against Blas could divide the Liberal vote a bit and make it easier for the FSLN to perpetrate election fraud.

UNPREPARED OBSERVERS - - - - -

17. (C) As with the November 2008 municipal elections in the rest of the country, the lack of accredited and trained observers remains a concern. EmbOff met with members of the Moravian Church who participate in the Bilwi Ecumenical Pastor's Council to discuss their preparation to observe the elections. They explained that during an Ecumenical Pastor's Council meeting in December, all of the Puerto Cabezas mayoral candidates expressed their deep concerns about avoiding the same election fraud and violence that had paralyzed the rest of the country. Alvarado, the ALN candidate, proposed that church leaders serve as election monitors and members of the council agreed. None of the members of the council had any previous experience or training as election monitors. Since the observation would be limited to the 30 main voting centers (JVRs) in Bilwi, they believed that there would be sufficient members to meet the task; however, they complained that they did not have the financial resources to fund the effort by themselves.

18. (C) EmbOff also met with the Center for the Development of the Atlantic Coast (Cedehca) an FSLN-affiliated NGO also planning to conduct election observation. Cedehca reported they were also in financial trouble with their funding source, Diakonia de Suecia, and are seeking new funding to support their observation efforts. Cedehca told us that their plan was to team up one experienced election monitor and a youth volunteer with a Ecumenical Council observer, and that they would hold a one-day training seminar before the election. On the eve of the election the Ecumenical Council had not received official written accreditation from the CSE.

19. (C) As reported previously (reftel), nationally recognized election observation groups, Etica y Transparency and IPADE, had asked for acce

SOPHISTICATED PRE-MEDITATED FRAUD - - - - -

110. (C) The RAAN has historically had high voter absenteeism, thus making manipulation easier. However, the opposition believed it was energized and that people in the countryside would vote. Our contacts told us that the city of Bilwi generally favored the FSLN candidates and the Puerto Cabezas rural areas favored the PLC candidates, making turnout key. A three-day radio call-in opinion poll held PLC candidate Blas ahead of the ALN, Yatama and FSLN candidates in head to head match-ups. However, as occurred in the earlier municipal elections, it appears the FSLN and the CSE have organized well in advance to secure their victory. We heard consistent reports of a truck, departing from Managua, full of boxes of pre-marked ballots for the FSLN being delivered to the region. Allegedly, these pre-marked ballots would correspond with the election results that the CSE will announce on election night - guaranteeing an FSLN victory in most of the races, and in particular, Puerto Cabezas. Similarly, the FSLN has apparently organized shock groups to "defend the vote" on election night, as they did elsewhere in November to discourage opposition protests.

COMMENT - - - - -

111. (C) The FSLN leadership has learned from the previous municipal election not to leave anything to chance. Their public and private activities show that they won't make the same mistakes with the upcoming January 18 RAAN municipal elections. They appear to have divided the opposition to reduce its strength in Puerto Cabezas and facilitate manipulation of the outcome. They have neutered the power of their election allies Yatama, guaranteeing that this potentially powerful political movement will not be a major factor in the election. Election observers, if they are even permitted to observe, are unprepared, though their presence will give the impression, at least locally, of a transparent election process. And to make sure the election goes exactly to plan, the FSLN may have already sent pre-marked ballots to substitute real ballots at the voting centers. In a region that suffers from extremely high unemployment because of a collapsing fishing industry and crushing poverty because of the after effects of a devastating hurricane, the FSLN may finally be able to secure its political control over an area that generated some of its fiercest opposition during the Contra civil war.

CALLAHAN